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Supporting children's upbringing: connecting across the generations

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Abstract

This article draws on the writing of the German social pedagogue Klaus Mollenhauer, to argue that upbringing is the overarching task of child and youth care. Upbringing involves adults passing on a valued cultural heritage to prepare children to face the future. It is a moral and cultural endeavor, enacted through caring, inter-generational relationships. The medium for upbringing is the lifespace within which adults present particular ways of being to children. Identifying upbringing as, primarily, a cultural endeavor reframes child and youth care away from an over-reliance on legalistic or 'scientific' treatment models to locate it firmly within the social domain.

Introduction

This article reflects some of my unease with much recent thinking on child and youth care. Different ideas each with their own, often ideologically motivated, adherents compete as to what is the best one to apply to children. In the UK notions of rights and protection have been dominant, in North America there seems to be a persistent quest for the latest and most effective treatment model, evident recently in the attention being given to neuroscience. Each of these, in their own way seems to be premised on a belief that there is a philosopher's stone and that if only we can find it, the answers as to how best to work with children and youth will be revealed to us. In fact, attempts to find and to apply

simple solutions to complex problems compartmentalize and limit what we do with children. They conceive of our relationships with them in largely individualistic, legal or scientific ways, identifying working with children and youth as what the literature might term a technical/rational task. My argument here is that it is first and foremost a value rational endeavor (Whan, 1986) rooted in the moral purpose to pass on what we consider valuable from one generation to the next.

In my book *Rethinking Residential Child Care* (Smith, 2009) I argue that child and youth care needs to move beyond discourses of rights and protection to those of care and upbringing. To be honest, when I wrote this I had some idea of what I meant by care, subsequently developed in an article written with Laura Steckley (Steckley and Smith, 2011), but if asked to define upbringing I would have struggled. It is one of these everyday words that it is easy to trot out but harder to explain. It can assume normative dimensions – ‘she has had a good upbringing’, ‘he was dragged up...’. But in an academic sense, and certainly in the English language, it remains largely unarticulated. Yet, I argue here that it ought to be considered the central task of child and youth care.

To articulate a concept of upbringing I draw on the work of the German social pedagogue Klaus Mollenhauer (1928-1998) and his book *Forgotten connections: On Culture and Upbringing* (1983). The book is recognized as one of the most important contributions to educational and child care theory over the past century and has been translated into several languages although not, until recently, English. However, two scholars, a Canadian Norm Friesen and a Norwegian, Tone Sævi have undertaken this task of translation and early drafts of what will appear as a full translation (Friesen, 2013) have been available until recently on the internet. It is these, along with other work by the same authors that I mostly use for this article.

Background

I have already identified Mollenhauer as a social pedagogue, a term that might not mean much to a North American audience, although Jack Phelan and Kiaras Gharabaghi use it in their writing. Social pedagogy is the discipline within which direct work with children and families is located across just about every European country except the UK and as such is rooted in European philosophical traditions. The term pedagogy derives from ancient Greek, *pais* (child) *agein* (to lead, bring up) (Eichsteller and Holthoff. 2010). The 'social' element in social pedagogy has roots in German philosophical responses to industrialization and concerns about loss of community and in the democratic movements that emerged across Europe following the revolutions of 1848 (Hamalainen, 2003). It is described as 'educational action by which one aims to help the poor in society' (Infed, 2012) and thus has distinct social and political dimensions.

The concept of upbringing is central to social pedagogy. Paul Natorp, a key thinker, identifies the essence of social pedagogy as 'the upbringing of an individual and their integration into society'. Social pedagogues are, thus, upbringers on behalf of society (Cameron and Moss, 2011). Their task involves the cultivation of the inner life or soul of the child and their inauguration into culture. The German term for upbringing, *Erziehung*, captures a sense of drawing out that which is innermost in a child. Another key German term is *Bildung*, which eludes direct translation but might be most readily thought of as formation, a lifelong process or what Mollenhauer calls the way of the self. Both *Erziehung* and *Bildung* transcend family and school boundaries, bringing together care, education, language and wider culture. Upbringing is understood as passing on a valued cultural heritage to prepare children to face the future. It is a debt owed by the adult generation to children.

There is not necessarily a commonly agreed 'good' or 'bad' upbringing. Adult understandings of upbringing are, by their nature, backward looking, based upon our own experiences of being brought up. Most of us can probably identify good and bad aspects of our own upbringing and indeed in how we have brought up our own or other people's children. Adults act as both midwives and censors,

offering opportunities but also, for good or ill, placing restrictions upon children growing up.

Bringing up children

Mollenhauer's intention in *Forgotten Connections* is to understand how adults bring up children. He takes a historical sweep, drawing on autobiographical material from sources as diverse as St Augustine and Franz Kafka and on drawings and wood-carvings depicting adults and children.

- 'I want the (perhaps very little) goodness in my life to be perpetuated
- I would like human history to continue with a sense of optimism
- My own existence can be perpetuated in some small way through my children
- The way of life I teach children has some value' (Mollenhauer, 1983: 12)

These are important points. Adults need to feel confident that there is something in their own lives that is worth passing on to children. Mollenhauer makes the point that,

Anyone who does not have a heritage of some kind to pass on will probably take little pleasure in raising or educating children. ... When the desire to see generations born beyond one's own is extinguished, educational and even experiential possibilities are greatly diminished. Conservative excesses threaten to turn upbringing into a ritualized duty. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that adults lose the desire to raise children and only want to interact with them as mirror images of their adult selves (1983, p.12).

One of the problems in present day child and youth care, certainly in the UK, is that working with children has become so subject to external scrutiny and regulation that adults have become afraid to demonstrate the kind of self-assurance that is required to properly care for children. They are fearful of being

accused of imposing their own values or of how the system might respond if things go wrong. So they fall back on following the rules, closing themselves off to more creative ways of working with youth and of the enjoyment and optimism that is part and parcel of their journey together into a future unknown. But in failing to pass on what they believe to be valuable, adults abrogate their responsibility to prepare children for that future.

I now turn to the question of how adults engage in the process of upbringing. Mollenhauer draws on his historical material to identify the importance of processes of presentation and re-presentation.

Presentation

In pre-modern societies adults and children lived their lives in largely undifferentiated ways - adults simply 'presented' to children their grown up way of life. The child's principal task was to reproduce this image. Thus, upbringing was implicit, habitual and generally not reflected upon; it just happened.

Re-presentation

With the growth of merchant capitalism, adult's 'work' became separated from children's 'learning'. This separation raised questions around which features of adult life were considered valuable and worth re-presenting and passing on and which should be filtered out from children's experiences. Such decisions required some forethought, planning and technical expertise. This was the backdrop to the growth of institutions to promote upbringing – schools, youth clubs and children's homes.

In deciding what features of adult life to pass on to children adults need to strike a balance between age appropriate 'shielding' of children from some of the harmful aspects of the adult world and helping them reach a 'position facing the world' (Plessner, in Friesen and Saevi, 2010). This might involve a slowing down or pacing of child's initiation to the adult world or a deliberate introduction of new and challenging experiences, for which adults need to take responsibility. There is an inevitable tension in such decisions and in the present climate we can

be tempted to fall back on technical means such as risk assessment frameworks to help us make them. They are, however, ultimately, moral decisions that bring into play our beliefs about children and childhood, about what constitutes a good childhood and about what kind of relationships we as adults might want with children (Moss and Petrie, 2002).

While institutional solutions to children's need for upbringing introduce the need for more systematic approaches, they do not eclipse the importance of more naturalistic connections between adult and children. By virtue just of being with children we become part of their upbringing. 'It is simply unimaginable' according to Mollenhauer, 'for an adult to undertake any educational or child-rearing measure without conveying some aspect of him or herself or the way he or she lives (1983: 14). There is, thus, an inevitable interplay between presentation and re-presentation; systematic and deliberate representation is inextricably mixed with reflective and habitual presentation. Messages transmitted by direct teaching are often less important than those conveyed by gestures, touch or tone of voice that unconsciously seep into a learner's consciousness (Friesen and Saevi, 2010). In this sense, the pedagogical relationship precedes educational theories and methods. Mollenhauer and the social pedagogical literature more generally offer some sophisticated insights into the nature of such relationships.

The pedagogical relationship

Herman Nohl, another foundational social pedagogic thinker, described the pedagogical relationship as 'the loving relationship of a mature person with a developing person entered into for the sake of the child so that he can discover his own life and form' (cited in Friesen and Saevi, 2010: 16). It is a sign of the times that talk of loving relationships between mature adults and developing children can arouse suspicion but if we are to take children's upbringing seriously then we need to countenance the fact that it is not an instrumental task but one that involves commitment and even love expressed from an adult to a child.

But this commitment needs to be purposeful. It is grounded in the difference between generations and a child's need for upbringing but also society's need to facilitate this to ensure its own continuation. The upbringing relationship is also oriented to the child and what they might become. In that sense it is asymmetrical unlike other personal relationships such as friendship – the adult is there for the child in a way that the child is not there for the adult. The extent of this asymmetry might alter over time, depending on the purpose of the relation, the adult's ability to care, the age of the child and their experienced need for care.

Pedagogical relationships are not all plain sailing but may involve conflict requiring that adults assert a level of authority or control. Kleipoedszus (2011) argues that relationships can be forged through conflict. Children need adults who will not avoid conflict due to fear, but who will work creatively with it. The connection created through genuine engagement and negotiation rather than artificial sensitivity makes it possible in the longer term for child care workers to encourage and nurture change rather than demanding it.

Ultimately, the pedagogical relation comes to an end. The child grows up and the asymmetry of the relation (if it is still maintained) dissolves. Indeed, the pedagogical relationship works towards its own dissolution. There is a shifting of the power balance within which adult power must decrease and a youth's power increase. As Mollenhauer (1983) explains, upbringing comes to an end when the child no longer needs the adult but can come to their own decisions about their future lifecourse. The grown child may still maintain a relationship with an adult who has acted pedagogically in the past, but this relationship will (or should) no longer be asymmetrical, but instead should become more reciprocal, meaning that the pedagogical relation has dissolved and been replaced by one of friendship or mutual attachment.

The arena for pedagogical relationships is adults' everyday life with children, where they meet, relate, communicate, and interact. Within this, every encounter is unique, unrepeatable and called into being by those present, for a purpose, and within a context. The nature of upbringing encounters are similarly to be found in everyday practices such as how to shake hands, how to greet a visitor and how

to offer a cup of tea. All these seemingly mundane tasks equip children to take their place in society. Seeking to pass on such cultural norms of behaviour to children in care is a debt owed by adults to children to induct them into the world in which they will have to and, indeed, have a right to take their place.

The paradoxes of upbringing

Mollenhauer identifies upbringing as being replete with aporia or paradoxes. The nature of the task is that we set out to pass on what we consider to be valuable from our own experience while recognising that the fruits of our endeavor cannot be pre-determined – we are in the words of Oscar Romero's poem 'prophets of a future not our own'. Yet, and this is the paradox, we need to pass on something that we consider to be of value. So, we pass on what we consider to be valuable in our world, knowing that this might be rejected and indeed hoping that children will take what we give them and change it for the better.

If we do not know what the future holds, then nor should we seek to 'know' children. Yet we attempt to do this through ever more elaborate assessment frameworks and recording tools (Hardy, 2012), a desire now bolstered by the thought that we can also, through advances in neuroscience, know the innermost workings of their brains. Yet, philosophically, the only way we can 'know' children is to render them like ourselves, to impose our adult ways and values upon them, thus 'murdering' their uniqueness and alterity (Levinas, 2000). Pedagogical practice starts from a different place as Mollenhauer points out:

The pedagogical caring and thoughtful relationship between the adult and child gets its intrinsic life and energy from the tension of the opposite: the utter uniqueness and inaccessibility of the child's self and lifeworld. Paradoxically this is the pedagogical opportunity that renders possible the pedagogical relationship (1983, p. 35).

Implications

One of my hopes in this article has been to reclaim an overarching social and cultural dimension to bringing up children and in so doing to question what seems to be a headlong rush for ever-more technical/rational means of engaging with them. 'Upbringing has a meaning that cannot be subsumed to science and scholarship' (Blankertz in Mollenhauer, 1983: i). Answers to complex questions of how to bring up children are not, according to Mollenhauer:

provided by theories of child development, teaching and learning, educational psychology, socialization, interaction, or schools and curricula. Responses in these areas are necessary but insufficient because every instance of upbringing and education has to do with the culture as a whole" (1983, p. 13).

Upbringing, thus, cannot be reduced to mere technique or procedure. There is, as Allan (2011) discovered from working in residential child care, no philosopher's stone. In fact, recourse to technique or procedure or to a range of 'technologies' in work with children and families avoids us 'having to ask difficult political and ethical questions about the causes of our problems or the meaning of success' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005: 58). So, discourses of rights, protection, treatment and the insights of neuroscience all have their place but this ought to be in support of a wider social and cultural understanding of children's upbringing.

Of far more importance in children's upbringing than the latest method or technique is the disposition of those adults who are entrusted with their care. Upbringing requires adults who are reflective, curious and confident in their own cultural heritage, who understand that every child and situation is unique and that there is no algorithm that will tell them what to do. In the best social pedagogical tradition, questions of what best to do are answered by the response 'It depends' – it depends on the child, the adult and the circumstances pertaining in any particular situation.

The understanding of the complexity and open-ended nature of bringing up children is not confined to social pedagogic traditions but already has a place in much child and youth care thinking. Magnusson, for instance notes that “development and growth is a mysterious, asynchronous, nonlinear process and dynamic. All child and youth care work aims to further growth and change, yet its pedagogy is not interventionist and direct. ... {but} indirect, cooperative, collaborative and invitational” (2003: XX11-XX111). There is merit in bringing together social pedagogic and child and youth care insights into how best we might engage with children around the process of upbringing.

Upbringing: a personal retrospective

I first came across Mollenhauer’s writing last summer. Some of my early thinking around the subject was undertaken while cycling round the Scottish Highlands with my younger son and his friend. I reflected at the time that this activity was itself an exercise in upbringing. The bike I used was one I bought almost 30 years ago when a couple of colleagues and I used to take groups of boys from the school I worked in at the time cycling around the Highlands. These trips were formative cultural experiences for me in my early days as a child and youth care worker and have remained with me. They were valuable in so many ways: introducing boys to the beauty of the Scottish countryside; the opportunities to learn about history and about nature; the need to understand and work within the expectations of the youth hostels we stayed in, to make beds, do chores, cook our meals and clean up afterwards and the closeness that comes from sharing physical endeavor and achievement. And, as the boys fished off a local pier we adults sat in a nearby hotel having a beer. This was not something to be hidden from the boys but was just what adults did and that they too would someday do. My bike, still going strong, provided the link to this past and to the cultural experience I was passing on to Aidan and Jack. And as I cycled alongside them, sometimes ahead, leading the way, sometimes encouraging them from behind, ... try a lower gear at this point, stay out a wee bit from the verge of the road, not

long to go now.... And I wondered if any of the boys who had come with us on those earlier trips had sought to pass this experience onto their own children.

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